

Breaking the fourth wall: spectating as metagaming in *Inscription*

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INTRODUCTION

Gameplay spectating expands the playground by breaking the boundaries set within a game to structure the user experience. Watching game streams is a manifestation of this phenomenon and it has already garnered attention (Taylor, 2018; Egliston, 2020; Johnson & Jackson, 2022). Players can gain knowledge that will in turn influence their gaming by watching these streams. Seen this way, watching game streams is a form of metagaming, which is described as “the practices within, around, outside, and about videogames” (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017, p. 15). This paper aims to explore how game stream watching as metagaming shapes players affective experiences by revealing its different roles in the game *Inscription* (2021). In doing so, I will argue that spectating is not solely an external means to provide information to players but is engaged in the process of gameplay and impacts players affective responses to their own play.

Rather than treating videogames as stable, static, separate objects, metagaming reveals that they are defined by the diverse practices that emerge between the human experience of playing videogames and their nonhuman operations (Boluk and Lemieux, 2017). This resonates with the idea of assemblage (Talyor, 2009) as well as Latour’s (2005) Actor-Network theory. As a form of metagaming, game streams reconfigure the relationship between games and players. In recognizing videogames as assemblages, this paper also considers the affects that are engendered by gameplay. Using my own experience of playing *Inscription* as a case study, this paper gives an answer to what affective responses does this game offer? And what roles do game streams play in generating particular affects?

The analysis is based on observing my own playthrough, which contains the process of gaming and watching game streams. The notes taken from the observations record mental and physical reactions, behaviors, feelings, as well as interactions with different objects. Starting from the experience, I can analyze how different objects work together with the assemblage theory. *Inscription* (2021) is a roguelike card game, whereas the affective experience of this game comes not entirely from card gameplay but also from a sense of uncanniness. Freud (2003) defined “the uncanny” as a level of uncertainty that operates between familiar and unfamiliar. In this paper, “the

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uncanny” is understood as an affective response (that works emotionally, bodily, psychologically, and intellectually) that is engendered through making familiar things unfamiliar (“the unfamiliar familiar”, as Spokes 2020, p. 115).

According to the field notes, the sense of uncanniness is strikingly manifested three times during the whole play process. The first time is from the beginning of the game: dark environment and creepy music render a horrific atmosphere, while the high difficulty of card-play and NPCs who have self-awareness strengthen a sense of uncertainty that it is more than a card game. The second-time uncanniness happens at the end of Act One, when players are presented with a series of footage filmed by a YouTuber called Luke (with a YouTube channel in reality). These clips reveal that Luke is investigating “Old-Data” through playing this game, and what I witnessed before is not my decision as a player, but a recording of Luke’s actions during his playthrough. The psychological distance between the player and the game is extended, so that the game itself becomes unfamiliar to me. Finally, the third-time uncanniness was evoked when the mystery of Old-Data was solved by watching an explanatory video after gaming, which subverted my understanding of this game.

Although the three moments of uncanniness are comparable, the factors generating them are disparate. The first-time uncanniness is achieved through the complex actions of several in-game actors, including the environment, particular operational rules, game mechanics, and non-human NPCs, whereas the second and third ones are induced by the actors outside the game, namely, game streams. The game streams facilitate three shifts: (1) Players become spectators. (2) The transformation of gameplay that shifts from card playing to unraveling the mystery of “Old-Data”, which Luke was trying to solve. (3) The change of playground, which is no longer the card table in the game, but the place they happen to be playing in reality. This marks that the last two moments of uncanniness come from metagaming, which is specifically manifested as “breaking the fourth wall”.

This study applies assemblage theory and the concept of the magic circle to examine how game streams contribute to uncanniness by breaking the fourth wall. According to Huizinga, the magic circle is an “isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain” (1955, p. 10). In other words, a spatial and temporal boundary is established between the playground and the real world when playing a game. The in-game elements of *Inscryption* not only create a sense of uncanniness but also establish a gameworld where players gain their spatial presence, that is, a sensation of being spatially located in the mediated environment (Hartmann et al., 2015). The gameworld in *Inscryption* is a magic circle that has been temporarily founded on one side of the fourth wall. However, Jesper Juul suggests the magic circle is best understood as “the boundary that players negotiate” (2008, p. 62). Negotiations reflect the dynamic nature of a territory, resulting from the constant emergence of new actors and the development of connections between them (deterritorialization and reterritorialization as described by Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). In this sense, game streams deterritorialize the magic circle.

Additionally, there are two types of game streams that play different roles in this experience of the uncanny, so we need to understand each object as well. One type is Luke’s footage, which defamiliarizes the relationship between player and game by raising unanswerable questions from the game that make them lose their spatial presence. The other is the explanatory video that attempts to give the answer. Instead of drawing the players into its gameworld, *Inscryption* brings an external world to

them. The intensity of the third-time uncanniness is more profound and stronger since it is built upon the affective experiences from the previous two occurrences of uncanniness. As such, the explanatory videos do not only produce but also enhance the uncanny.

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